

Tradition as a Tool: Designing Culture and Negotiating Power in Chinatown, Sydney

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This article uses ideas of Postmodernism to examine how and why tradition has been manipulated in Chinatown, Sydney. It looks firstly at the redevelopment of Chinatown in the late 1970s, and how traditions have been used to evoke a sense of Chinese culture. It interprets this use of tradition through the notion of the simulacra. This leads to a criticism of Chinatown as a tourist attraction, and analysing the effect tourism has on tradition and why. However, the involvement of the local Chinese community draws out the use of tourism as a tool of political and social empowerment. The discussion broadens to analyse the relevance of the commodification of culture for Sydney, specifically looking at the notion of a multicultural identity formed through traditions that construct an imagined nation. Multiculturalism means a collection of differentiated cultures, but its effect is to create hybrid ones, and ultimately one identity of the multicultural. The article then constructs other arguments against Multiculturalism, including that it enables policy based on elitist, romanticised versions of culture, as in the commodification of Chinatown; that it obscures real social inequalities; and that it allows imperialist voyeurism of the exotic in the same way that the West historically studied the Orient.

Introduction

Chinatown has a history that reflects Sydney's cultural policies, and it is the policy of Multiculturalism that has made the site what it is today. The redevelopment in the 1970s made tradition a highly important cultural aspect. Here, tradition is defined as a way of maintaining a sense of identification with a nation. The nation is 'an imagined political community', imagined because 'the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members...yet in the mind of each lives the image of their communion.' (Anderson 2006, p.6). For the Chinese community, traditions preserved an imagined communion with a group existing remotely. But this does not satisfactorily explain Chinatown, because it was redeveloped for the purposes of tourism, and provokes critical questions regarding Multiculturalism in Australia, and specifically Sydney.

The redevelopment of Chinatown in the late 1970s grew out of the rising numbers of Chinese living in Sydney, in combination with the acceptance of Multiculturalism as policy. The Chinese community was becoming more permanent, buying since the 1950s into popular residential areas such as Ashfield, Kensington and Chatswood, while community organisations such as the Chinese Tennis Association and Chinese Chamber of Commerce were renewed (Fitzgerald 1997, pp.146-7). Students and war refugees 'contributed to an ever-growing pool of Chinese whose life experiences had never been closely associated with China' (ibid. p.148), and the community began to carve out a permanent residency in Sydney. With the introduction of Multiculturalism in 1973, government began to fund 'language schools and Chinese organisations' (ibid. p.150).

Media platforms such as radio and television began to cater specifically for Mandarin and Cantonese-speaking groups. From the 1970s, plans to turn the area around from the 'undesirable ethnic ghetto' it was generally regarded as (Mak 2003, p.94) were discussed between the City Council and the Dixon Street Chinese Committee, a collective of Chinese business owners. In 1980, Lord Mayor Meers opened the mall of Dixon Street, fitted out with 'arches and all the 'authentic' accoutrements' (Fitzgerald 1997, p.152).

Tradition as Tourism

One of the most important reasons for the redevelopment (apart from establishing a Chinese identity in Sydney, showing dedication to Multiculturalism and improving crime rates) was the economic opportunities presented by making Chinatown appealing to a greater consumer base than just the Chinese community, including 'White Australia' and tourists. As Mak asserts (2003, p.95), 'The promotion of tourism to local and international visitors was clearly one of the main aims of the council and the Dixon Street Chinese Committee.' This aim has been fully realised, and Chinatown is seen as an exciting area of Sydney, 'a colourful mixture of asian (sic) culture, shopping and cuisine. The area's distinctly oriental architecture, street lanterns and archways confirm it as a showpiece for Australian Chinese culture.' (<http://www.discoverysydney.com.au/things/chinatown.html>). These additions to the space are derived from Chinese traditions in architecture, while the food served and many of the products sold are aspects of Chinese culture. By these means and 'By virtue of its name, Chinatown laid claim to being a representation of the Chinese.' (Mak 2003, p.96). However, using objects to represent a people is necessarily problematic. By being selective in what aspects, what traditions, are used to represent a culture, the culture is effectively distilled down to a few markers, which cannot possibly contain all the variations, contradictions and depths inherent in the meaning of culture. The thinking of Baudrillard explains this effect.

Baudrillard draws a distinction between representation and simulation, which can be used to explain the use of cultural symbols in Chinatown. 'Representation stems from the principle of the equivalence of the sign and of the real' (Baudrillard 1994, p.6), as the symbols in Chinatown claim to be Chinese traditions and thus to represent China. 'Simulation, on the contrary, stems from the utopia of the principle of equivalence, *from the radical negation of the sign as value*, from the sign as the reversion and death sentence of every reference' (ibid.). Baudrillard identifies that the image can only reflect the '*absence* of a profound reality' (ibid.): the absence of Chinese culture in a Sydney suburb. To combat this lack, and because of a nostalgia for the signified, the process of linking images to identity is endowed with claims to authenticity. These could include the idea that the redevelopment involved the design of a Chinese man (Henry Tsang), and that it had the support of the Chinese community, many of whom actively participate in the tourism industry. However, this is part of the 'strategy of the real, of the non-real and the hyperreal that everywhere is the double of a strategy of deterrence.' (ibid. p.7). The 'traditions' applied in Chinatown ultimately turn the area into a simulacrum, and by this means defeat the very purpose of tradition.

If replication of tradition does not provide an authentic culture, then the notion of Chinatown as a tourist attraction must be questioned. Hakim Bey's criticism of tourism compares the 'archaic reasons for travel - call them 'war', 'trade', and 'pilgrimage'' (<http://hermetic.com/bey/tourism.html>, para.5) to the tourist. He finds that while both the pilgrim and the tourist want something from the area they visit, 'spiritual goods do not follow the rules of supply and demand like material goods' (ibid. para.11). Rather, 'Tourism's real roots...[lie in] *war*. Rape and pillage were the original forms of tourism, or rather, the first tourists followed directly in the wake of war, like human vultures picking over the battlefield carnage for imaginary booty - for *images*' (ibid. para.17). This notion of images - 'the tourist's act exists only in the images of that act, the snapshots and souvenirs' (ibid. para.19) - corresponds to the offering of Chinatown and the tourist industry more generally. Simulated tradition, in the form of, say, a 'Chinese' arch, is offered, and the tourist takes a photo. Here is a greater simulacrum; not only is the experience of culture simulated, but the experience of the experience is as well.

Understanding why this simulacrum continues to proliferate lies in a deeper analysis of tourism. Bey notes that the tourist wishes 'to admire the *picturesque*, the mere view or snapshot of difference, to *see the difference*. The tourist *consumes* difference' (ibid. para.13). Difference is an integral part of the tourist industry; in fact, it makes the industry possible. Nezar AlSayyad (2001) observes that 'there is an increasing demand for built environments that promise unique cultural experiences' (p.2). This leads to eager attempts to establish attractions that will draw attention, and 'independent nations...find themselves needing to exploit their national resources' (ibid. p.3), including tradition and heritage. Tourists generally seek authenticity, however:

...the authenticity they seek is primarily visual. Thus, their encounter with 'real' history remains marked by distance. And while they may wish to meet the world of the 'other', they also take great pains to limit its influence on them'. (ibid. p10)

There is consequently no need for those who sell tradition to make it authentically authentic; the tourist is happy with, or is deceived by, tokens of culture. In fact, what is more important is that 'visitors will not come, or return, unless their visits are enjoyable' (ibid.). Therefore any experiences offered to the tourist are designed to conform to their desires and expectations rather than to be accurate. As Flemming Christiansen notes:

Arches, signposts in Chinese...names in Chinese characters and all sorts of Chine-style kitsch...Westernized restaurant names, often written in brush-stroke letters...the Oriental ambience is a main emblem of the Chinese catering trade...[it] has become increasingly standardised as consumer expectations have grown more sophisticated...the exotic is standardised in order to satisfy the customer's hopes of predictability. (2003, p. 165)

The process of making tradition enjoyable and recognisable also strips it of any meaningfulness. In Sydney's Chinatown, neither the meaning of the signs written in Cantonese and Mandarin, the symbolism of the lions at the arches, nor the historical reasons for the curved shaping of the rooves are explained, but they look recognisably 'Chinese'. The process whereby culture is modified and sold to - and therefore controlled by - those who have the economic capital to buy it draws inevitable criticisms of cultural imperialism.

However, as critics have identified (Robinson 2001; Mak 2003), the community whose culture is commodified, here the Chinese population of Sydney, actively take part in the manufacturing. In Sydney, selling culture was a way for the Chinese community to gain a political voice. As a united and now wealthy group of business owners, the manufacturers of their own culture have gained the cultural capital to participate - and not necessarily as a united group - in political and social Sydney life. For example, in the late 1990s, Chinatown was 'perceived by many people in the community to be in decline' (Mak 2003 p.98), and it was once again revitalised. 'Of the original 1980 refurbishment, all that remained by 1999 were the ceremonial archways and lions' (ibid. p. 99). Modern lighting was installed and many of the grocery stores were replaced with modern shopping (ibid.). Today, Chinese 'traditions' sit next to fashion stores that sell Western fashions, for example in Market City, and shops like Morning Glory, which sell contemporary kitsch Asian products. Mak explains the political use the refurbishment had for the community.

This new image for Chinatown divided the Chinese community, with claims that the refurbishment had brought about a downturn in business due to bad *feng shui*. Lord Mayor Frank Sartor claimed that the *feng shui* was not at all the issue and that the backlash by some of the Chinese community was due to height restrictions in Chinatown - their comments were politically motivated. The issue of Chinatown's height restrictions dominated the council election campaign and with the 11 September 1999 council election Chinatown entered a new phase in its history: the movement into mainstream politics. (Mak 2003, p. 99)

Participating in tourism was thus a valid way for the Chinese community to carve out a place for themselves in the city that had historically treated Chinese immigrants harshly. This does not, of course, change the imperialist reasons for the voyeurism of other peoples as tourists. However, I believe a more relevant way to look at Chinatown today is to view it as a part of the global city of Sydney.

Chinese Culture in Multicultural Sydney

Sydney, especially since the 2000 Olympics, is a major focus of tourism in Australia, and is a key representation of the nation-state to the world. To preserve Australia's official policy of 'Multiculturalism', a policy supported and to some extent expected by much of the Western world, Sydney must have a discernable dedication to seeing it realised. Chinatown seemingly shows this, though it is a centre more for 'Chinese-ness' than for

the Chinese community itself. Certain organisations provide services, but it is a business and not residential area, and as we have seen is effectively a dilution of culture for the enjoyment of tourists. Ultimately, 'The fact that Chinatown was a place where the council would invest money...did not translate into ownership of the site.' (Mak 2003, p.99). Without a meaningful, authentic Chinese culture, the area has been absorbed into the *multicultural*, global appeal of Sydney.

Another way of looking at this is to apply the manufacturing of tradition in Chinatown to Chinatown-within-Sydney. Nezar AlSayyad posits that 'Although the two activities, consuming tradition and manufacturing heritage, are...produced by different agents, one cannot separate them from each other' (2001, p.14). He also defines heritage: 'the deliberate embrace of a single choice as a means of defining the past in relation to the future' (ibid. p.14). In Sydney, the single choice, taken from the past in order to define the future, is Multiculturalism. Chinatown must fit into the story of Multiculturalism, which means selecting which of the site's aspects are offered for consumption and which are hidden. The history of the Chinese community is characterised by racism and violence, including riots, perceptions and realities of vice and the White Australia Policy. However, in the manipulation of Chinatown, this history is obscured by a simple narrative of migration, growth and consequent acceptance under Multiculturalism. This is done through a range of symbols, like bilingual signs and an attractive pedestrian mall, that manufacture an image of the past - the heritage of Chinatown within Sydney. It is a heritage that suits Sydney's multicultural future, and thus the process is not merely about the economics of tourism, but political expediency.

This manufacturing of heritage is effectively a re-creation of the nation. Renan asserts, 'Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation' (1990, p.11). New traditions of Multiculturalism are established that allow the forgetting of previous policies, and provide a new 'imagined political community' (Anderson 2006, p.6).

Thus Multiculturalism has come to define Chinatown, and its role in Sydney. It has also initiated hybridity in the city, not merely of people but of traditions, heritage and space. Hybrid space is clear in a number of ways: Chinatown has grown and now sprawls beyond its initial boundaries into the 'non-Chinese' parts of the city; the tram and monorail provide links to other urban areas; and its tourist appeal is linked to the appeal of the nearby Entertainment Centre and Darling Harbour. Culturally, Chinatown is merging with the Spanish Quarter, restaurants and shops of other Asian cultures abound in the surrounding streets, while there is a United Arab Emirates money exchange on the Dixon Street mall. This hybridity shows that the notion of a culture strictly differentiated from others - as the traditions of Chinatown have been bound in static images - 'impose[s] unitary, essentialist identities at the expense of others and provide the grounds for exclusionary practices' (Marotta 2008, p.300). Symbols of different cultures in Sydney merge together and form 'ethnic Sydney'. Yet imposing differentiated identities is arguably what Multiculturalism attempts to do.

There is a deep contradiction within the idea of unifying cultures under the banner of Multiculturalism. It can be understood first by examining the way that the 1980s refurbishment was conducted by the council. Kay Anderson explains the role of Alderman A. Briger. He was at the front of the push to upgrade Chinatown; 'For him, a singular Chinese culture, identity and presence could be re-created on Dixon Street area, and his was the image that exerted an influence on policy-making' (Anderson 2000, p.15). His understanding of the culture was romanticised and superficial, and as Anderson recognises, self-conscious; 'In an officially multicultural society, this seemed easy to justify' (ibid. p.16). His romanticism effectively skewed the depiction of traditional Chinese culture, and moreover, 'the history of Chinatown's upgrading in Sydney suggests that European representations [like Briger's] of the East were the ones that shaped government, and apparently, media, decision-making toward the area' (ibid. p.17).

The decision to 'preserve' what was considered Chinese tradition, or what Jordan and Weedon (1995), reflecting on the arguments of Rasheed Araeen, call 'Ethnic Arts and Culture', was a part of the perceived contemporary 'need' for difference. Difference is, as we have seen, a crucial part of tourism and multiculturalism. However, focusing on the need for cultural difference has, as Araeen argued, 'taken us away from the basic question of equality for all peoples within a modern society' (ibid. quoted p.478). An example is that commodifying Chinese culture through tourism, while empowering and enriching parts of the Dixon Street community, employed many individuals in service jobs, catering to an often much wealthier market. Furthermore, the directing of culture - as in Chinatown - is '*partially* racism' (ibid. p.481). Those who aim to implement Multiculturalism can have the best of intentions, and cultural representation is certainly necessary in the social health of a minority like the Chinese in Sydney. Yet, the Multicultural policy makers' and implementers' 'liberal ideas conceal some unacknowledged racist beliefs' (ibid. p.481), namely that the creativity of a people cannot progress or change, and they must therefore be represented through the same cultural traditions. This is to assume, from the position of power, based on race, how another culture should speak, and is 'A FIXING OF DIFFERENCE' (ibid. p.482). 'The point is that when it is assumed... - usually inadvertently, by people of goodwill - that people of Colour should limit their participation in...culture to such spheres, that is a racist practice' (ibid. p.483).

The fixing of difference reaches even deeper when one considers the question that Edward Said poses: '*how* does one know the "things that exist", and to what extent are the "things that exist" *constituted* by the knower?' (1978, p.300). Said's 'contention...that Orientalism is fundamentally a political doctrine willed over the Orient because the Orient was weaker than the West' can be usefully compared to Chinatown; in the early days of Chinese migration, the immigrants were generally temporary and looking to take wealth (in the form of gold) from Australia for their families back home (Fitzgerald 1997), which placed them in a position of weakness as compared to European colonialists, the 'original' Australians. The interest that the West took in the Orient, that is, imperialist ethnography, is similar to the voyeurism, the desire and curiosity to see and summarise the exotic, at the expense of real understanding, that tourists participate in

when they visit Chinatown. Moreover, it is reflected in the way that the Chinese community has historically been understood.

Conclusion

The Chinese community in Australia has historically been discriminated against in different ways. Even now, there is no attempt to deeply integrate the authentic meanings of Chinese culture into the mainstream; 'Multiculturalism' has removed blatant racism, and allowed government and society in general to largely ignore the fact that Chinese culture remains a simulacrum. To answer Said's question, Chinese culture is known only as far as it has been experienced, meaning it is not truly known. Further, since the politics of mainstream society and economic principles dictated the form that Chinese culture took, the knowledge we have was designed by our own interests.

Notes on Contributor

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